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# TEACHING PRONUNCIATION: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines a pronunciation problem identified in a short recording of a Yemeni learner of English. Following an introductory statement of three language learning principles, the nature of the way the Yemeni speaker differs from a native speaker in her pronunciation of theta is analysed. Some examples of published learning materials focussing on pronunciation are reviewed to consider how far they would be likely to help the learner, and how far they match my own teaching principles. Finally, a sequence of learning activities designed to help the learner overcome the problem are described.

### Three principles for the teaching of any aspect of a second language

- (i) Learners should receive feedback and should be made aware of their mistakes.
- (ii) Language learning activity should be related to the learner's communicative needs.
- (iii) Learner autonomy should be encouraged.

- (i) *Learners should receive feedback and should be made aware of their mistakes.*

Even though we may accept Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) and agree that the learner is equipped with "an inbuilt acquisitional mechanism" and that the learner's internalized language system will develop automatically, it is dangerous to trust in an approach that avoids intervention in the language-learning process. Tonkyn (1994.6) indicates two areas where benefits of formal instruction can be found. Firstly, "instruction is much more likely than informal interaction to provide useful negative feedback" and secondly, "instruction... can help to prevent premature fossilisation". While Porter (1997.12) found that some previous MATEFL students believed that "... lack of any feedback... will probably be construed by some learners as indicating lack of success", failure to signal error may cause the learner to misplace his confidence in false hypotheses, often resulting in error fossilisation. Clearly, positive feedback must be given when appropriate and one must remember that fluency may be hindered by too much negative feedback, but generally the teacher's silence, or failure to correct, might result in serious damage. Furthermore, the timing and nature of negative feedback is crucial to successful learning and in this the teacher should be flexible. Simply observing a rule that errors must be corrected immediately or never until a task has been completed, for example, is not useful. Teachers should be able to judge the gravity of error, identify early symptoms of fossilisation, and act against it whenever and however they see fit. Finally, it is preferable if the learner can monitor his own performance and obviate the need for negative feedback from the teacher.

- (ii) *Language learning activity should be related to the learner's communicative needs.*

Effective and motivating language learning activities will likely have a high degree of “face value” for the learner. If the learner perceives the activity to relate to his communicative needs outside the classroom not only is it justifiable, but it is also more likely to result in success. However, problems can arise when the teacher's perception of “face value” differs from the student's. These problems are often related to the notions of “authenticity” and “real communication”. Porter (1997.11) states that the success of using authentic materials can be limited because “full authenticity cannot be achieved under normal classroom conditions”. However, the problem does not lie so much with the extent of the “authenticity gap” between real life and classroom communication, which teachers seem to fear and try too hard to close.

“Authentic” or “real life communication” activities do not automatically have face value. A professional tennis player does not want to spend a lot of time and money on a coach who believes that the best way to prepare for matches is just to play matches with him all the time. If the coach is a good player, he should give up coaching and become a pro himself. If he is a good coach, he should realise that he is not a good player, and that he should spend his time preparing his student for the real match in structured, thoughtful ways. By extension, it is not always necessary for “language learning activities to involve real communication” (Porter 1997.11) but learners should understand how activities relate to their real life goals. About twenty-three years ago, at the height of the communicative and anti-structuralist boom, as I sat quietly monitoring pair work in the corner of the

classroom, I was scolded by an impatient Spaniard who ordered me to give him the language now because he needed it on Sunday. Certainly he had a point. Although my confidence in the authenticity of the activity led me to believe that what we were doing was as close as we could get to his Sunday needs, the student in this case evidently thought otherwise.

**(iii) *Learner autonomy should be encouraged.***

Claiming that it is important to encourage learners to achieve autonomy, or a degree of self-reliance and independence from the teacher, is obvious but knowing how to do it is not. The key to autonomy is strategy, and the learner must develop as many of these as possible. In some respects, one could venture as far as to say that the teacher should not actually teach English but rather train students to become good learners of English. Unfortunately, this approach has low face value, which could in part be due to the fact that what leads a person to be a good learner is still only partly understood. However, if the teacher can motivate his students to set realistic goals for themselves, and help them to select, or design, and complete tasks which will assist them in attaining those goals, their progress is all but guaranteed. Some strategies for learner autonomy are fairly simple if the goals are well-defined. For example, if the goal is 650 points in TOEIC, the learner can be directed to the self-access resource centre and be sat down with some cassette tapes, listening questions, and answer keys. However, if the learner's goal is to improve his pronunciation, which may include fossilized errors, the need for some form of professional help and equipment, would be hard to ignore.

### An example pronunciation problem

The transcript of an interview with a Yemeni learner (see Appendix) shows that she fails to produce theta, the voiced dental fricative /θ/, consistently. Errors occur principally with the word *south*, to a lesser extent with *north* and *something*, but not with *everything*, *think*, and *things* (see Table 1, fig. 1).

Table 1. Analysis of the learner's production of theta

Key to Columns.

1. Words containing theta which the learner uses in the interview and the phonemic transcription of English RP, or what a native speaker would normally produce.
2. Phonemic transcription of the learner's divergence from RP.
3. Number of cases where the learner diverges from RP.
4. Number of cases where the learner produces the word correctly.
5. Total number of cases.

Figure 1

1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
<i>south</i> /saüθ/	/saüt/	6	2	8
<i>north</i> /nɔ:θ/	/nɔ:t/	1	4	5
<i>something</i> /sʌmθiŋ/	/sʌmtiŋ/	1	0	1
<i>everything</i> /ɛvriθiŋ/		0	2	2
<i>think</i> /θiŋk/		0	1	1
<i>things</i> /θiŋz/		0	1	1
TOTAL		8	10	18

Figure 2

Theta position	Example words	3	4	5
word-initial	<i>think, things</i>	0	2	2
word-medial	<i>something, everything</i>	1	2	3
word-final	<i>north, south.</i>	7	6	13
Total		8	10	18

The problem appears to be confined to word-medial and word-final theta (see Table 1, figure 2 above). There is an additional problem concerning her tendency to pause in mid-sentence after word-final theta in *north* and *south*. In case 2, for example, she says:

... but the north they are all./nɔ:θ ðei/.

In contrast, a native speaker would not usually pause and interrupt the flow of connected speech. Although there is no assimilation, he would probably link the sounds as follows: /nɔ:θðei/

### Is the inconsistency systematic?

Not only is theta very simple phonologically but she produces it correctly in ten out of eighteen cases. All the more intriguing is that there appears to be no obvious system governing her erratic performance. The line graph in Table 2 below reveals that she neither produces the sound correctly nor incorrectly on more than two consecutive occasions and that her overall performance neither deteriorates nor improves as the interview progresses. However, in all cases of divergence from English RP, her substitution of /t/ for /θ/, rather than /s/, /z/, /f/ or /d/, as other learners sometimes do, is systematic.

#### *Table 2 Success and failure of production of theta*

Notes.

1. The numbers on the horizontal axes correspond to the numbering of the words on the transcript of the interview (see Appendix).
2. The numbers on the vertical axes indicate success and failure in positive and negative units.
3. Each upward stroke on the graph represents successful production and each downward stroke represents failed production.

Figure 1

Line graph illustrating success and failure of production of all instances of theta in the recording.

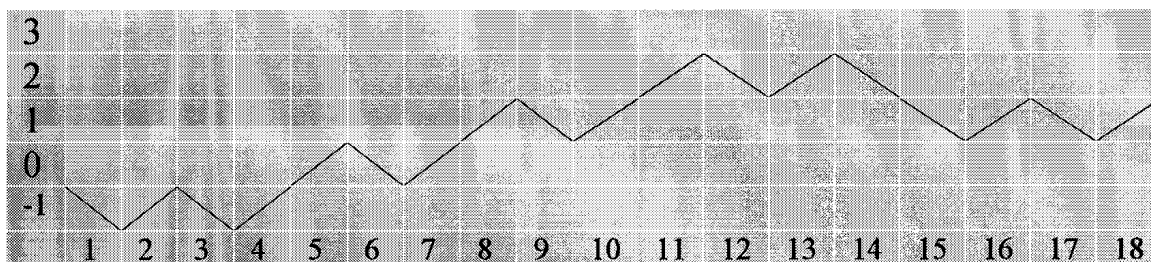


Figure 2

Line graph illustrating success and failure of production of theta in the word *south*.

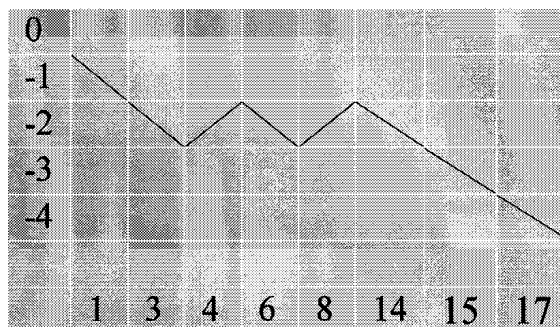
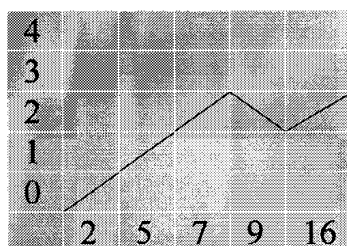


Figure 3

Line graph illustrating success and failure of production of theta in the word *north*.



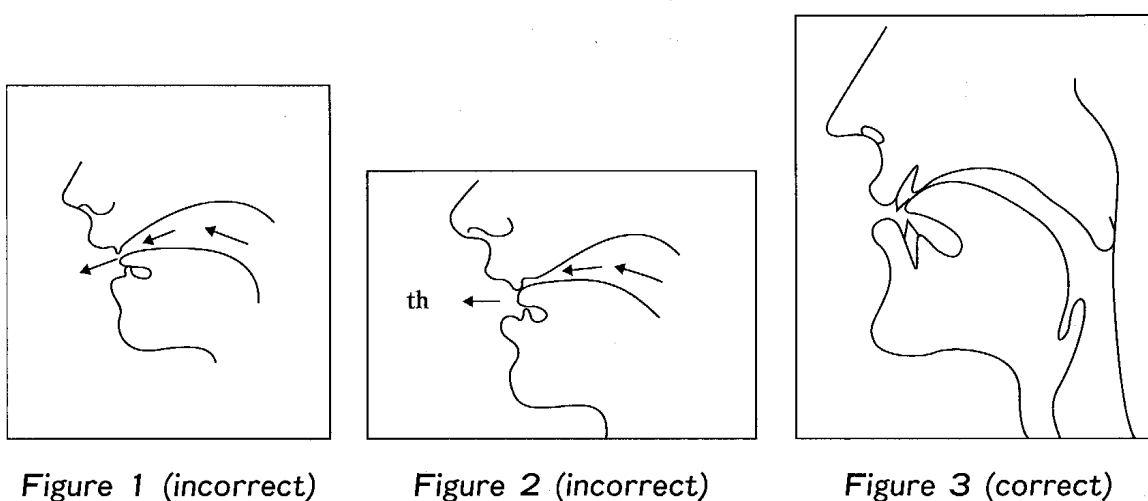
How does the native speaker produce /θ/?

Erroneous descriptions and voice diagrams of how to produce theta and ethe appear in some pronunciation text books (see Table 3, figures 1 and 2). Baker (1981:133, Figure 1), for example, writes: "Put your



tongue between your teeth. Blow out air between your tongue and your top teeth”. Similarly, Lane (1997:68, Figure 2) writes that: “Both sounds (theta and ethe) are made by placing the tip of the tongue between the teeth”.

*Table 3 Voice diagrams from published materials explaining how to make theta.*



Roach, (1983:49) observes that this is misleading and that “the tongue is normally placed *inside* the teeth... with the tip touching the inside of the lower front teeth and the blade touching the inside of the upper teeth” (see Table 3, Figure 3). It is certainly possible to place the tongue between the teeth and produce /t/ instead of theta and a teacher’s insistence that she do this could be part of the problem. On the contrary, neglecting to place the tongue between the teeth as instructed may even account for her ten successful productions of the phoneme.

**What is required of the learner to successfully pronounce /θ/ in place of /t/?**

Apparently the contact of the tongue behind the teeth is too brief to create the small passage through which the plosive can be released to achieve the desired result: the hissing sound necessary in theta. She needs to maintain the air-seal surrounding this passage for only a fraction of a second longer. However, it must not be forgotten that she is able to produce the sound correctly and the inconsistency itself suggests that the problem is a psychological one.

**What psychological reasons could account for the learners inconsistency?**

Words including the sound theta are always spelled “th” and so there could be no problem with interference from the written word. However, any of the following factors may be involved.

- (i) Interference from L1 and/or other languages.
- (ii) The state of her learning.
- (iii) False hypotheses about English pronunciation.
- (iv) Her attitude to English pronunciation and imitating the native speaker.
- (v) Performance conditions.

(i) *Interference from L1 and/or other languages.*

Kenworthy (1987:126) writes: “(Arabic) learners will tend to substitute /s/ for /θ/...”. However, it’s difficult to know where this generalization came from. Although it’s not uncommon for Arabic speakers to experience this type of L1 interference, the phoneme does exist in

classical Arabic and she, as an educated person, would have to know the sound. It also exists in many regional pronunciations of Arabic. Whether or not this includes Yemeni Arabic, I do not know. It's possible that the Yemeni woman has produced /t/ instead of /s/ as a first step in the direction of a correct /θ/. In addition, she may have learned another language, possibly French, where *north* is *nord* and *south* is *sud*. Notice that the final consonant "d" is not pronounced when spoken in isolation.

(ii) *The state of her learning.*

Her inconsistency suggests that she is at an incomplete stage of acquiring the phoneme /θ/. We must understand that learning is not a one-stage process, the building-block view, and appreciate Leech's (1994.19) organic view of language learning and his metaphor of the "burgeoning plant". Although he applied it to the acquisition of grammar, the same is true with phoneme acquisition. Furthermore, it is feasible that the learner's inaccurate and inconsistent pronunciation of /θ/ is due to a fairly rigid form of fossilisation which is resisting efforts to eradicate it.

(iii) *The learner has arrived at false hypotheses about English pronunciation.*

Theta is "sometimes elided eg. *months* /mʌnts/or/mʌns/in final consonant clusters" (Gimson 1962.168). Consider the following:

- a) The "th" sound sometimes disappears...
- b) ... in words like "months".

The learner may have learned a) but not b) and believes it is sometimes permissible to omit theta, and, since it is a sound she may not like, she often takes that liberty.

(iv) *Attitude to English pronunciation and imitation of a native speaker.*

From a cultural perspective, she may feel that placing the tongue between the teeth is reptilian, therefore unattractive, perhaps constituting undesirable behaviour for a woman. Alternatively, she may find the articulation of /θ/ uncomfortable. Kenworthy (1987.75) remembers a French learner who complained that “the ‘th’ sound makes you spit and splutter. You have to stick your tongue between your teeth”. As commented earlier, it is not necessary to stick your tongue between your teeth.

(v) *Performance conditions.*

It is also conceivable that the interviewer has distracted her by note-taking or indicating error in other inaudible ways (like placing his tongue between his teeth) when she mispronounces theta. Even without visual distraction, in spontaneous speech, the learner needs to focus on other linguistic points, grammatical or lexical for example, and this could contribute to her erratic performance. Kenworthy (1987.75) observes: “Some learners may be able to make the ‘th’ sounds on demand but when speaking spontaneously some or all of them are lost”.

How far would exercises 1 and 4 (see Table 4 below) from “Basics in Pronunciation” (Lane. 1997.68&69) be likely to assist the learner?

*Table 4*

*Two examples of published learning material for pronunciation (Lane 1997.68–69)*

Exercise 1 Listen and practice.

Listen and repeat the words with theta /θ/. Then choose five and say

them out loud.

- |            |              |             |           |
|------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1. thing   | 5. three     | 9. author   | 13. fifth |
| 2. think   | 6. thousand  | 10. nothing | 14. bath  |
| 3. thanks  | 7. something | 11. tooth   | 15. death |
| 4. theater | 8. healthy   | 12. mouth   | 16. south |

#### Exercise 4. Hearing Differences

Listen and repeat the pairs of words. Listen again and circle the word you hear. Then choose three pairs and say them out loud.

- |            |               |              |             |
|------------|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1. a. math | 3. a. thin    | 5. a. then   | 7. a. three |
| b. mass    | b. tin        | b. Zen       | b. tree     |
| 2. a. with | 4. a. breathe | 6. a. thanks | 8. a. thing |
| b. wit     | b. breeze     | b. tanks     | b. sing     |

The value of the exercises should be assessed in view of the following:

- (i) How far would they be of assistance to her in terms of content?
- (ii) How appropriate are they in the light of the learner's particular stage of learning?
- (iii) How far do they match my own teaching principles?

**(i) How far would they be of assistance to her in terms of content?**

At first glance, her phonological needs are addressed in exercise 1. Not only does the list contain high-frequency examples of word-initial, word-medial, and word-final theta, but more especially because they include words which she uses in the recording. They are:

1. *thing* 2. *think* 7. *something* and 16. *south*.

While she produces 1. and 2. successfully, her inconsistency suggests that she may relapse into error. Leaving aside a point of dissatisfaction, the omission of word-final multiple consonant clusters, as in *fifths* /fifθs/, the content is generally adequate for her purposes and it is tempting to assume that listening and repeating them could result in improvements in her pronunciation. With regard to exercise 4, the material might help her to distinguish the sounds which she confuses: /θ/ and /t/ in numbers 2, 3, 6 and 7, but her time would be better spent listening to a recording of her own speech.

(ii) *How appropriate are they in the light of the learner's particular stage of learning?*

As we have seen, the learner is at an incomplete stage of learning. Unfortunately, exercise 1 leaps in at what Porter (1997.15) describes as the fourth phase of the overall teaching-learning sequence, namely "closely-monitored practice", which follows "learning" at stage 3. The learner needs to be made aware of her tendency to produce the sound /t/ instead of /θ/ and "to be sensitized to the existence of such differences before effective learning can take place" (1997.16). While exercise 4 invites the learner to focus on these differences, it follows, not precedes, the "listen and practice" stage of the exercise. In other words, the exercises are not based on an acceptable learning sequence for any learner, let alone the Yemeni. Furthermore, since the /ð/ has been introduced, together with other sounds that she does *not* confuse with theta, the exercise is more likely to hinder than assist the learner at this stage.

(iii) *How far do they match my own teaching principles?*

In spite of the theoretical or structural shortcomings outlined

above, both exercises provide useful listening input and opportunities to practise theta. My first principle, “Learners should receive feedback and should be made aware of their mistakes”, can be satisfied here. It is far simpler for the teacher to give negative feedback on pronunciation when the learner produces words in isolation, particularly in a one-to-one or small class situation, than when the learner is engaged in a communicative task. It is also far simpler for the student to produce accurate sounds.

With regard to my second teaching principle: “Language learning activity should be related to the learner’s communicative needs” my ability to judge the usefulness of Lane’s pronunciation exercises is restricted by my limited knowledge of these needs. As mentioned before, some of the words in exercise 1 can be related to both her communicative and phonological needs. The final stage of each exercise “then choose five (exercise 1), or three pairs (exercise 4) and say them out loud” allows the student the opportunity to judge the face value of the items for practice. If she failed to choose the four words from exercise 1 that I have identified earlier as relating to her communicative needs, I would not be disappointed. Her choice may indicate that she considers other words from the list to relate more strongly to her needs in ways that I am not aware of. For example, her father may be an author (*author* is word 7 in the list). I would be more encouraged if she based her choice on the results of her own performance in exercise practice since I consider my third principle, that “learner autonomy should be encouraged”, to be the most important of the three. If the learner could acquire the language laboratory skills necessary to record her own production of theta, compare it with the models on the recorded exercises, identify some important areas requir-

ing improvement, and do all of this without my help, I would be entirely satisfied. Part of the satisfaction might come from being relieved of some, or all, of the burden of giving negative feedback myself and being in a position to praise the development of her independent learning skills instead. Additional satisfaction would come from not having to decide the content of her learning according to my own assessment of her phonological needs balanced against her communicative needs.

### **A sequence of learning activities to help the learner**

The following stages in the learning sequence, outlined by Porter (1997:15) shall be described.

- (i) Sensitization.
- (ii) Focus.
- (iii) Learning.
- (iv) Closely monitored practice.
- (v) Lightly monitored practice.

#### **(i) Sensitization.**

The learner needs to be sensitized not to the existence of theta but to her erratic production of it. I might begin by asking her if she is conscious of making any errors in pronunciation. If she admits that theta is a problem, we could begin on my first exercise. If not, I would ask her to listen to the recording and attempt to identify any problem areas, and, in particular, any features of her pronunciation which are inconsistent. Successful identification of the theta problem, without prompting from the teacher, satisfies my third and most important teaching principle concerning learner autonomy. The learner's failure



to distinguish the sounds /θ/ and /t/ would require that the teacher intervene with negative feedback, and principle (i) would be motivated. I would then proceed to satisfy my curiosity surrounding the possible causes of the problem as discussed earlier.

**(ii) Focus.**

Firstly, I would hope that she agreed with me that the theta problem was closely related to her communicative needs. Secondly, I would ask her to listen to the tape on her own and fill in the blanks of Exercise 1 (the interview script as it appears in the Appendix with the /θ/ and /t/ symbols removed from the boxes for reinsertion by the learner), then compare it with my own transcription (as in the Appendix).

**(iii) Learning.**

Porter (1997:16) claims that “there could be no activity designed to bring about the mysterious experience of actual learning” and it would be unwise to disagree. However, if it were genuinely mysterious we must accept that it may happen during sensitization or before focus.

**(iv) Closely monitored practice.**

With the aim of developing her learner autonomy, I would guide her towards discovering the strategy of compiling a list of words containing theta (see Table 7, exercise 2 below, for an example).

Table 7 Exercise 2. Example list of words and phrases for practice of theta.

<u>Word-initial theta</u>	<u>Word-medial theta</u>	<u>Word final theta</u>
thin	something	south
thing	anything	mouth
think	nothing	north
third	everything	faith
thumb	author	fourth
		fifth

Multiple consonant clusters

two fifths

three fifths

four fifths

Short phrases for linking practice

His thumb.

Azziz thinks.

In the north they carry arms.

In the south they never carry arms.

People in the south are more educated.

The list should also include some multiple consonant clusters, which were missing in Lane's exercises, such as *fifths*, and some short phrases to practise linking, a problem I referred to earlier. For example, *In the south they never carry any kinds of arms* and "combinations involving rapid tongue glides, eg. /s+θ/ *this thing*" (Gimson 1962.168). I would then record the contents of the list and ask her to listen to it. After recording her own production, and comparing it with my model,

she would finally present me with a tape containing clear evidence of consistently accurate production of theta. However, negative feedback from the teacher might still be necessary at this stage of the learning sequence.

(v) *Lightly-monitored practice.*

In exercise 3, part 1 (Table 8 below), which focuses strongly on her communicative needs, satisfying principle (ii), I would suggest she uses cardinals- such as fourth, fifth, sixth - for extra practice of theta and to validate her unsupported claims that people in the south of the Yemen are more educated.

*Table 8. Exercise # 3*

Part 1

Answer the questions and fill in the table in part 2 with information about the Yemen.

1. What evidence is there to support the view that people in the south are more educated than people in the north? What percentage of people in the south and north complete secondary education? What percentage go to university?
2. Which countries do people in the south visit?
3. In the north they follow special rules. Can you give an example?
4. What do they eat in the Yemen? Give some examples of popular meals in the north and in the south.
5. What clothes do they wear in the south and in the north?
6. Can you think of any other similarities between the north and the south?

Part 2

	<u>the South</u>	<u>the North</u>
Secondary education	__ %	__ %
University	__ %	__ %
Travel destinations		Saudi Arabia
Behaviour	You can do what you want	You must follow special rules eg. __
Politics	Communist	Not communist
Food		
Clothes	a short skirt called a __	
Weapons	No	guns, daggers
Some things which are the same: Muslim religion		
Language		

Exercise # 3 Part 3

Complete the following sentences using information from the table in part 2.

1. People in the south are more educated than people in the north. For example \_\_ of people in the south go to secondary school compared with only \_\_ in the north. Also, \_\_ of people in the south go to university compared with only \_\_ in the north.
2. People in the south travel to many different countries like \_\_, but in the north they only go to Saudi Arabia.
3. In the south you can do what you want but in the north they must follow special rules like \_\_
4. In the south we have a communist government but in the north they don't.

5. In the south they eat \_\_, but in the north they eat \_\_.
6. In the south the men wear \_\_ but in the north they wear \_\_.
7. Everything is different apart from \_\_ thing (s). We are Arabs and we are Muslims and \_\_.

In order to realise this aim, we would need data concerning education in the Yemen which may be available on the internet. Without this evidence, I would recommend that she move on to the next points of the exercise. Once again, I would want her to record part 3 of exercise 3 and monitor her own performance. Finally, I would record with her a similar interview to the one on the original recording and insist that the learner not use notes. Obviously, the interview would not be “authentic” or involve “real communication” since I would already know the answers to the questions I would ask her, but the most important thing is her appreciation of how the activity relates to her communicative needs. Following this, the learner must again monitor her production of theta, in accordance with principle (iii). Since relapses may well occur, as pointed out by Kenworthy, it may prove necessary to highlight errors, as in principle (i), and to return to further closely-monitored practice to encourage automatization and to avoid fossilization.

### **Conclusion about the learner**

As developing autonomy in the learner is my key principle, she must realise that learning is a continuous process and decide her next course of action. I would make a recording containing an accurate and improved version of her final interview in lightly-monitored practice. By comparing her recording with mine she should be able to identify

additional problem areas in her pronunciation and seek to rectify them by adopting the same strategies. However, as we have seen, good advice from the teacher is often necessary and my advice here is that she does not concentrate on *eth* next. Although it would involve extra practice in producing dental fricatives, I believe that she should give her tongue a well-earned rest and focus her attention on *schwa*.

### **Conclusion about the teaching of pronunciation**

Although some commentators have insisted that the teaching of pronunciation is essentially a behaviourist practice, remaining largely unchanged over the years, the model or approach I have suggested depends to a great extent on the learner noticing her own pronunciation errors and working independently of the teacher to correct them. The model is also in line with task-based language learning theory where learner needs are identified through the performance of a task, in this case, an interview with a native speaker. However, it is a remedial activity for particularly problematic or outstanding pronunciation difficulties in a learner's performance which I would certainly not recommend for the instruction and practice of all phonemes in the English language. Indeed, as Nakai points out (2005:14), emphasis on individual phonemes can inhibit the learner's progress through focus on the way sounds are produced rather than the communicative content in the development of productive skills.

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## Appendix

Transcript of the interview with phonemic transcription of both failed and successful production of theta by the Yemeni speaker. Comments and questions by the interviewer, a native speaker, are italicized.

People in the (1) south [t] are more educated and also we have hm more experience in cause they used to travel abroad to go everywhere you can meet any of them in every place but the (2) north [θ] they are all, they all

the time if they travel they go only to Saudi Arabia. They work there they get money then return yeah with the money but um the people from the (3) south [t] they are as I told you more educated, and and quite different.

*And their behaviour is different as well?*

Yes, of course it's different for instance you can do what you want in the (4) south [θ] but in the (5) north [θ] no you can't. You must follow special rules um also the government in the (6) south [t] is different from the government in the (7) north [θ] um...

*You mean different politics or?*

Yes, of course, different politics because in the in the (8) south [θ] there's communist but in the (9) north [t] no and er the way of life is different, the way of, that we clothe, the way of our food, of course ? (10) Everything [θ]

*The food is also different?*

Yes of course different because (11) everything [θ] is different between us except (12) something [t] that we are Arab and also because we are Muslim and this is I (13) think [θ] the main, the main..

*What about the way of dressing of the men, for example?*

For the men they wear in the (14) south [t] they wear the trouser and shirt and sometime they wear small or short like skirt, but it's not skirt, special for men and in the (15) south [t] they never carry any kinds of arm, but in the (16) north [θ] you can find a dagger, one person can carry a lot of kinds, different kinds of arms, like maybe a gun a dagger and, he walk like an army, but in the (17) south [t] this you can't go by these (18) things [θ].